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Working for the Weekend

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Abstract: This paper discusses the history and importance of ‘the weekend’ for both work and leisure from the perspective of a weekend librarian. By examining the rise and (possible) fall of the British ‘industrial weekend’ of recreation it is possible to reflect on the implications for future working hours in the academic library sector.

As you enjoy your Saturday lie in or tuck into your Sunday lunch, spare a thought for colleagues working weekends. Leeds Beckett Library’s commitment to 24/7 opening includes staffing the weekend between 11:00-17:00 on Saturday and Sunday.

So what’s it like working weekends at Leeds Beckett Library? And how does having a less traditional working pattern fit into historical trends within the world of work & leisure?

Weekends in the Library

Leeds Beckett Library has a dedicated weekend team, the majority of whom also work at least some hours during the week. On each day there are between three and six staff working at both campuses providing a full service for frontline and remote enquiries.

Most do either a Saturday or Sunday, although as a Weekend Services Librarian I work both days. We are all contracted to do 45 weekends over the academic year (but don’t work them at Christmas, Easter and during August). In addition to us, there is also the need for security and cleaning services to enable the library to stay open.

A fun element of working weekends is our involvement (often via social media) in events such as National Library Day (for example, one year we did a “day in the life of the library” on Twitter). We’ve also given out heart shaped candy to students on Valentine’s day and dressed up for Halloween.

A disadvantage of weekend working is your social life can be out of sync with week day colleagues, friends and family.

Working at weekends has encouraged my interest in researching the history of weekends and why they are perceived as such a special time for leisure and relaxation (rather than for work). As Walton asks “Is time at the weekend.. worth more, however it is spent, than weekday time?” (2014, p.111).

The rise of the weekend break

“For it was Saturday night, the best and bingiest glad-time of the week, one of the fifty-two holidays in the slow-turning Big Wheel of the year, a violent preamble to a prostrate Sabbath” (Sillitoe, 1958, p. 9).

The rise of “collective time off” (Ebrey and Cruz, 2014, p.239) on Saturdays and Sundays is fascinating. It is something many workers perhaps take for granted and yet hasn’t always existed. Weekends, as we know them today, evolved over a long period.

At higher social levels those in the “leisured class” have long organised their movements & social activity seasonally rather than weekly (Walton, 2014, p. 208).

“The Season dates back to when the upper classes of Britain divided their time between the country estate and the London town house. Gradually, the whirlwind of private parties, cultural and sporting events became regular markers on the calendar” (Lawrence, 2014, p. 24).

So it's necessary to look elsewhere, at the industrial middle class and law makers, to comprehend how the weekend break for British workers developed.

Sunday as "a day of rest, reverence and religious observance" was widely encouraged by those in authority from the 1700s (Walton, 2014, p. 207). There were efforts to restrict Sunday trading and leisure activities. However, by Edwardian times there were some relaxation in legislation, with activities such as cinema showings allowed. It's interesting to note, however, that the Football Association didn't accept Sunday play until 1960 (Walton, 2014, p. 208).

During the 18th Century there was an extension of this Sunday rest day into a break on Monday or "St Monday" (Walton, 2014, p. 203) by miners and craft workers. This tradition of having Monday off persisted for a long time in some sectors or areas of the country - for example the Grand Music Hall in Bolton had large audiences for its Monday afternoon shows even in the 1920s (Walton, 2014, p. 203).

However, the move from Monday to Saturday as a day off was favoured by employers so that relaxation (and especially drinking!) ran into a "psychological block of Sunday" (Walton, 2014, p. 207) rather than disrupting the start of the industrial week.

By the 1820s cotton factories of Lancashire where closing early on Saturday afternoons and the 1850 Factory Act prescribed a 2pm shutdown in the cotton industry to protect child workers from long hours (Walton, 2014, p 208).

Later there followed a gradual but widespread demise of Saturday morning factory work and the spread of the 5 day working week in factories and offices (Walton, 2014, p. 204). Ebrey and Cruz (2014, p. 236) suggest that the weekend became more significant in the early 20th Century under "Fordist" methods of production as "under Fordism, the weekend as a 'social time' was left alone. Hours worked on Saturday and Sunday were often designated 'unsocial hours' and were assigned a financial premium for those working them."

So the weekend as a "gridded timespace" (Ebrey and Cruz, 2014, p. 233) emerged over many decades as a result of interference from religious, capitalist and state institutions.

It is perhaps also significant that this coincided with a time when basic material needs were met and there was income available for leisure activities (Walton, 2014, p. 210) and consumer goods (Ebrey and Cruz, 2014, p. 237). This meant a growth in Saturday afternoon activities such as spectator sport, theatre shows and shopping. So the workforce now had a dual role of producer and consumer.

A national survey of fish and chip sales patterns conducted in 1906 showed peaks in purchasing on Friday nights in industrial areas, revealing the significance of Friday as pay day and as gateway to the weekend break from work (Walton, 2014, p. 204).

"Saturdays and Sundays would become the axis around which the rest of the week spun; Friday came to be the high point for many, with Monday the low" (Ebrey and Cruz, 2014, p. 237).

It is simplistic to suggest that this was the experience of all people. Some will have been excluded from this weekend leisure culture, for example the transport and entertainment workers who provided services to those enjoying their weekends off work.

However for many "this version of the weekend, the product of an invisible handshake between employers and the respectable masculine working class, enabled it to survive and flourish" (Walton, 2014, p. 209).

What weekend break?

Walton (2014, p. 205) argues there's been a decline in this "industrial weekend" due to "the end of organised capitalism in the old sense of regular hours, lasting skills, long-term work, occupational communities, and predictable, shared rhythms of work and leisure."

Indeed since the 1970s economic and cultural change has meant that many more people engage in paid work at the weekend (Walton and Ebrey, 2014, p. 114). This is due mainly to our transformation from being an industrial to a service economy (Gloger and Toaddy, 2016).

Deregulation of the working week in the UK means that Saturday and Sunday are often treated by employers on the same basis as any other day, for example with no extra pay for these "unsocial hours." (Ebrey and Cruz, 2014, p 238). Many restrictions on Sunday shopping and leisure have

been lifted and we live in a society with round the clock leisure and entertainment opportunities. During the last ten years there has been a clear increase in the number of academic libraries offering seven day 24-hour opening in the UK (Ravenswood et al, 2015, p. 54).

The rise in weekend working is only one example of the increasingly flexible labour market. Recent years have seen the growth in the so-called 'Gig Economy' which is also sometimes called the 'Sharing Economy' or 'On-demand Economy.' (Freedland and Prassl, 2017, p.1).

This started to emerge around ten years ago with companies using websites and/or mobile phone applications ('apps') to "intermediate between customers and large pools of 'on demand' workers." (Freedland and Prassl, 2017, p 3).

There have been concerns about working conditions associated with some of these companies, including Deliveroo and Uber (Lusher, 2017; Freedland and Prassl, 2017). In addition, it is estimated that 900,000 people are employed by big high street brands and other companies on zero-hours contracts (MacAskill and Helm, 2017).

On a more positive note, in other countries there have been progressive experiments regarding working hours. For example, some companies in Sweden have introduced 6 hour days (a 30 hour week) without pay cuts (Gloger and Toaddy, 2016). There have been many benefits demonstrated (including less absenteeism, greater productivity, and more job creation) but the financial cost may not make it sustainable (Chapman, 2017).

We now live in a society where people in different sectors work all kinds of hours. Yet weekend working can still be a political hot potato, as demonstrated by the #ImInWorkJeremy campaign on Twitter when health secretary Jeremy Hunt blamed 6000 preventable deaths a year on a "Monday to Friday culture" in the NHS (Cercic, 2015).

What could this mean for library staff in the future?

When looking at the history of weekends it becomes evident that Leeds Beckett Library's commitment to 24/7 opening (and staffed

weekends) reflects wider trends in work and society. More flexible work patterns have coincided with a "24 hour culture" where many people expect services to operate "beyond 'normal' office style opening hours." (Ravenswood and Stephens, 2015, p. 52).

Changes in the world of work, in particular the so-called gig economy, could no doubt have future implications for the way library staff are employed. It is hard to predict, with the increase in self-service facilities and electronic resources, the number and types of staff the library of the future will need.

To take a bleak view, 24 hour access to electronic resources could make library buildings (and the people who staff them) less relevant. However, studies suggest the contrary – that the library as a physical and social place to study remains important. This suggests that it is the space (both to study as an individual and in groups) rather than the resources which feed the demand for 24/7 opening (Ravenswood et al, 2015, p. 55).

Which brings me back to my working weekends. Looking at the trends it seems likely that those willing and able to work weekends will continue to be in demand. Perhaps it will also mean that more people will need to abandon their week day nine-to-five for more flexible work patterns. But it also seems like the weekend as a much loved social institution will remain because it has become "so embedded in everyday life that its structural power in the organisation of time and space is often overlooked" (Walton and Ebrey, 2014, p. 111).

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